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ABSTRACT

The changing role and selection procedures for college presidents in the United States, and the changing character of education generally, are traced historically. The information may also serve as a current guide for selection committee members. The discussion considers the traditional role of the college president and its evolution, forces for change, current selection procedures, establishing the qualifications for the college president, and finding the person. Forces for change included the secularization of education, democracy and egalitarianism, and the growth of professionalism. In considering appointment to the selection committee, extra-institutional influence, and the roles of the retiring president, the faculty, and students may be considered. Qualifications for the position which should be assessed include academic background, experience, personality, and special institutional needs. The selection process includes obtaining the names of candidates, the process of elimination, interviewing the top contenders, and making the right choice. (SW)

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CHANGING ROLES AND SELECTION PROCEDURES FOR COLLEGE PRESIDENT

by

LORNE DICK

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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CHANGING ROLES AND SELECTION PROCEDURES FOR COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Appointing a president is probably the most crucial and far reaching action a college board will ever take. For better or for worse, the president has a profound influence on the climate and direction of the institute he heads.

This being the case a great deal of care and diligency needs to be exercised by all those involved in the selection process. Unfortunately in many cases the committee members and even the board members have very little understanding of the task they face, and although they would sincerely like to do their best, they really don't know how to go about it.

The purpose of this paper is a very pragmatic one: It is to trace the changing presidential role and selection procedures in America historically, but it is also intended as a current guide for unsophisticated selection committee members in a responsible, arduous and important task.

II. THE TRADITIONAL ROLE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Formal education through and beyond high school has been made available to a greater percentage of the population in the United States than is true for any other major nation past or present. The ever-growing quest for knowledge and the social and economic value that are believed to flow from it, are bringing American Colleges and universities into the lives of people today to an extent that would have been considered impossible even a generation ago. The origins of this ever expanding system of education need to be understood if the magnitude of what has been accomplished is to be fully appreciated. But important as well is an understanding of the position of the chief executive officer of the post secondary institution, for it is he more than anyone else who translated the American educational dream into some form of reality.

The American college has its roots in Europe, was transplanted to American soil and grew here into an institution that has changed almost beyond recognition. Its immediate forebearers were the colleges that made up the universities that made up Oxford and Cambridge. (Schmidt, 1970, p. 16). When the graduates of these institutions in the seventeenth century came to America and could turn their attention away from the immediate problems of food and shelter, they established schools that resembled as nearly as possible the British schools from which they had come.

The first college to be chartered in the United States was Harvard in 1636 and by 1769, eight others had been added. All were established under religious auspices, and although the propogation of

Christian doctrine was stated as their chief purpose, it was by no means the only one. For example the Yale Charter, after safeguarding "the Christian Protestant Religion", goes on to speak of instructing in the arts and sciences so that the students "may be fitted for Public employment both in Church and Civil State" (Dexter, 1916, p. 3). However, the selection of the president clearly indicates the distinct emphasis the institution was to have.

The position and title of the American college president was established when Rev. Henry Dunster was chosen president* of Harvard college in 1640. (Ferrari, 1970, p. 8). William and Mary, the second colonial college, designated the Bishop of London as its president. In fact as a rule trustees and administrators in these institutions were predominantly ministers. The president and fellows forming the Harvard corporation were clergymen; this was true of Yale as well. When Princeton was formed, twelve of its twenty-three trustees were Presbyterian ministers.

In his study of The Old Time College President, George Schmidt (1970, pp. 184-185) examined the background of a large number of college presidents and concluded that nine-tenths of the college heads who held office before the Civil War were ordained ministers. Even after laymen began entering the field progress in that direction was slow. In many cases lay presidents were succeeded by another minister. He claims that in 1850 the ratio of laymen to ministers was about the

* The term used to designate the chief executive officer varied; Rector, Provost, Principal or Chancellor were also used and this is true even today. When the term president is used here, it really refers to all of the titles used to designate the chief executive officer.

same it had been in 1800, approximately one to ten. This should not be surprising since the best educated men of the time were ministers of the gospel, therefore it was to be expected that college presidents would be of this calling. These were the best men, intellectually and morally that the colonies could produce and best represented what education was to achieve.

The growth of the college presidency according to Ralph Prator (1963, p. 9) was stimulated by two factors: the emergence of lay boards, and the nature of the faculty.

> In colonial times, the contract of colleges increasingly fell to a board of men chosen from outside the professorate, an idea taken from the Scots. It meant, however, that the board was forced to rely heavily on the president to assume executive type responsibilities. The boards authority came to be essentially centered in the presidential office.
> Also in colonial times, the teaching staff members had little professional cohesiveness. Often the president was one of few permanent members of college staff. The only secure and sustained professional office in American collegiate education was that of the president himself.

The duties and responsibilities of college presidents were generally the same in all the early colleges. Prator (1963, p. 7) lists and describes a number of these.

a) Presided at commencement and other ceremonies.
b) Arranged for morning and evening prayers as well as Sunday worship.
c) Conducted faculty meetings.
d) He taught the most important subjects.
e) Visited the other classes of other instructors.
f) To see that the course of studies was properly executed.
g) To counsel individual students.
h) Make rules for student government.
i) Promote virtue, piety and good learning.
j) Report to trustees.

The truly American nature of the Presidency is most closely related to the last named duty, that of reporting to the trustees. Traditionally presidents were the senior teacher and simply carried out the orders of their superiors. Not so in America: here almost from the beginning he was the prime mover and organizer, nearly always superior in academic training and experience as compared to his trustees, and so it was quite natural that they should turn to him for advice.

Some of the small colleges expected the president to do almost everything else in addition to teaching and directing the affairs of the institution. For instance the first president of Columbia University was at one time charged with purchasing books and apparatus, providing hooks for cloaks in classrooms, selecting a cemetery lot, and reporting faculty members attendance at prayer. Other institutions listed similar assignments. But most important of all his tasks was not infrequently that of obtaining funds.

Scholarships, lotteries, legislative grants, private subscriptions, represent but a few methods used to keep institutions financially afloat and regardless of what method was adopted, the largest single factor in its success, according to Schmidt, was the college president (1970, p. 68).

The president's relationship with his faculty was basically that of employer to employee according to Prator (1963, p. 11). There was no tenure; review of grievances, and faculty organization, and individual rights were unknown in early college organizations. College presidents could be very despotic, and often were.

There were undoubtedly many who objected to the powers of the president but it is abundantly clear that the office was one of the main instruments for the advancement of higher education in the United States.

III. FORCES FOR CHANGE.

According to Schmidt (1973, pp. 226-227) and Ferrari (1970 pp. 9-10) the college era came to an end shortly after the Revolutionary War. They list several reasons for this shift in American higher education. The most potent reason was the industrial revolution that swept across the nation which produced organized industry and with it new patterns of thought and philosophy. It produced the new age of science. The old courses of Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric, ethics and metaphysics were considered to be inadequate. There was an increasing demand for more practical courses, courses that would meet the demands of the times. The response to these demands gave rise to the establishment of the university.

A rapid development of universities took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, a development that was accelerated by the Morrill Act and by a rapid westward expansion. Ferrari (1970, p. 10) states that "there was a steady move from a religious to a secular emphasis in college curriculum, and from a simple to a complex form of academic organization; from a more classical curriculum to a vocational - utilitarian curriculum; from a philosophy of education for the few to education for the many; from simple literary societies to a great growth i- extra-curricular activities; and for the increased growth of coeducational insti-

tutions, professional and graduate programs, and research activities due to the influence of German university on American higher education".

That these changes should influence requirements for a chief executive officer is very obvious. As Rudolph noted (1965 p. 419) the clergymen presidents had to be discarded because they lacked the worldly skills, the committment to a secular curriculum and because the world in which the college now moved was more secular and less influenced by religion.

Now it was executive power that was needed above all. As the institutions grew, the need to unify, balance and direct an ever developing institution demanded so much time that there was virtually no time for anything else but administration. The president's office, as a result of this process, thus evolved into something quite different from what it had been. He still needed to be a gentleman and a scholar but first and foremost he had to make the organization function as a harmonious whole and maintain the morale of the university.

It has already been noted that during colonial times many colleges were mere shadows of their presidents and that the president had almost autocratic powers over the instructors. As some of these institutions grew and developed into four-year colleges or universities the relationship between the president and his faculty underwent gradual changes as well.

Hofstadter and Metzger (1955, pp. 206-310) clearly point out that the increased stature and power of the institution came about slowly. It came about, not as the result of some overarching principle

of professional autonomy, but largely as the result of the student discipline problem on the one side and trustee interference on the other. Even strong presidents in the growing institutions could not enforce the many rules that were to guide student behaviour. They also deplored increased trustee intrusion into instructor's affairs. And so it was the president himself who recognized the need to spread his powers over a larger base. At Yale it was Jeremiah Day who undertook to share his powers with leading members of the faculty. He conceded to the faculty not only the right to change curriculum and undivided power over discipline, but also the right to make all new appointments. In fact by 1871 the process had developed to the point where the president claimed that "with scarcely an exception, no law has been passed, no officer appointed, unless after full consultation and exchange of views between the boards of control and of instruction." (Hofsteader, 1955, p. 309). Down through the years the trustees and their chief executive officers relinquished numerous powers: to revise the course of studies, to control student admission, to undertake systematic classroom visitation, to conduct final examinations, to mention only a few.

Another step in the direction of democratization can be traced in regard to the treatment of students. A number of Americans had studied in Germany. They came back insisting that power was better exercised over subjects than over students, that the emphasis should be shifted from discipline to scholarship. The traditional teaching methods, the curriculum, limited electives and particularly the

impact of religion on moral conduct came under question as well. Ultimately these questions resulted in answers that liberalized the entire system of higher education.

As the powers of the traditional president were diffused, his position and function took on a more distinctive character. He was no longer a "jack of all trades". Enrolments increased, diversification multiplied, the elective system became an accepted fact. Along with these changes, the colleges and universities required a new kind of executive officer. Rudolph notes (1965, p. 418) that academic presidents began to recognize themselves as belonging to a society of professionals. They now became managers who could do for higher education what the captains of industry were doing in other areas of American society.

Now the capacity to lead became very important indeed. The new era demanded men who knew what they wanted, or better yet, knew what their various publics wanted and could balance the various interests of community, students, faculty, and trustees in such a way that all could perceive that they were getting what they wanted. As Stoke said so well, "The college president as the Man of Learning has been giving way to the Man of Management, although the change has not taken place without strain and conflict." (1959, p. 2).

IV. CURRENT SELECTION PROCEDURES

According to Selden (1960, p. 11) the average length of service for a college or university president is 8.1 years, about the same as is true for corporate presidents. Since the average board members

hold positions for about the same length of time, it is very likely that each will be involved in at least one presidential appointment. Dodds (1962, p. 261) claims that trustees are unanimous in considering the selection of a new president their most important and critical responsibility. Since most board members have little or no experience for their task, it is understandable that they approach it with some trepidation. It is important that they receive some guidance.

Before the board takes any action in regards to selecting a new president, even before it appoints a selection committee, there are two questions which it must resolve: a) What are the current institutional needs, and b) How will the institution be run until a new appointment is made?

Institutional needs change over time. If the needs are financial, then the candidate the board looks for must obviously be selected on the basis of the strength he possesses in the financial area. The object of the presidential selection process is the matching of a person and an institution. The second question is not always a concern since the retiring president may have given enough lead time to find his replacement. If this is not the case, the trustees must find someone who can direct the institution while the search for the president procedes, usually it is a trusted senior member of the administration who is not considered a candidate for the position. In some cases persons have been made acting presidents in order to try them out for the position.

A. Appointing the Selection Committee

Having determined the current need of the institution and having secured interim leadership, the board must now proceed with the task at hand: the appointment of a selection committee. Who should be on the committee? Some of the board members? All the board members? Should faculty and students be involved? These are some of the questions that need resolution.

In a study by Bolman (1965, p. 3) it was discovered that at 87 percent of the institutions contacted, a specially appointed committee of trustees formed the search committee. In some cases where the number was fairly small, the boards worked as a committee of the whole. Where the board was too large, the chairman selected members on the basis of some of the following criteria: a) the degree of interest in the institution; b) their sensitivity to the current needs of the institution; c) ability to judge human personality; d) time for the task.

But selection committee may be made up of other persons besides board members. Some committees are made up of representatives from faculty, administration, students as well as board members. However the committee may be constituted, the important consideration must be the committee size. The general concensus seems to be that it should have no more than 6 - 9 members.

1. The role of the retiring president

In a study of Presidential Succession, Beimbaum (1971) points out that the succession process in business and higher education are

quite different. In business the selection of the successor is characteristically done by the predecessor and by the establishment of extensive programs for inservice training prior to selection. The succession process in higher education is carried on by the board and in most cases does not involve the incumbent. Bolman's (1975) survey confirmed that view. In most cases the retiring president was expected to keep his hands off the selection of his replacement.

It seems somewhat strange that it should be so, particularly if the retiring president has been successful. Although it would not be suggested that he sit on the committee, he could certainly help the members of the board in terms of procedures, job description and other general matters. This point is made clear in the following quotation: "I thought it odd that no one asked the president for any help. At the very least, we should have talked to him in terms of a job description for the office of president. In industry that would have been the normal procedure". (Wished to remain anonymous).

2. The role of faculty

The final decision in the selection of a president lies with the board but since the faculty is most immediately affected by that decision, the board may decide to involve its members in the selection process. An AAUP Bulletin, (Dec. 1962, pp. 321-23) states clearly that faculty should have an active part in the selection of the president. The evidence indicates that formally or informally the faculty role in the selection process is increasing. In 1939 faculty members were consulted in about 29 percent of the institutions seeking presidents. By 1962 this rate of participation had increased to 65 percent. (Bolman 1965).

Involving faculty members in the search can have some real advantages if the involvement is more than perfunctory. At the least participation can produce an increased understanding between faculty and trustee members. Faculty members can help identify candidates and search out their qualifications and can participate in the interviews, to mention but a few. In small institutions particularly, faculty members can make or break a president, so that to appoint someone against the wishes of faculty may jeopardize the success of a candidate even before he has a chance to prove himself. Faculty involvement can contribute to the selection process and should be encouraged.

3. The role of students

It seems rather strange that no mention of students involvement in the selection process is mentioned in the literature. During the militant 60's students found their way into many decision-making committees. It is known that they have in some cases sat on presidential selection committees. Observation would lead one to conclude that although students may have little to contribute directly, the support they feel for the candidate and carry to their peers may have some value.

4, Extra-institutional influences

The most powerful extra-institutional group is probably the alumni. In this area too the literature is very scarce. Apparently the alumni plays no part in the selection procedures, at least not formally. Undoubtedly they as well as other outside interest groups contact members on the selection committee informally and thus exert at least some influence on the decision.

V. ESTABLISHING THE QUALIFICATIONS

Bolman's (1965) study of the presidential selection process showed that the most realistic search committees did not waste time looking for the perfect candidates, but concentrated on hunting for prospects whose qualifications were outstanding in those areas in which their institution's needs would be greatest in the years ahead. When they didn't know what those needs were, they took the trouble to find out.

A. Academic

Dodds (1962, p. 268) believes that the basic criteria to be used in the selection of a president is his competence as an academic thinker and that the most promising place to look for this kind of person is within academia itself. That boards have traditionally chosen presidents with good academic backgrounds is borne out by Ferrari (1970, p. 66). His investigations indicate that taken as a group 75% of the college and university presidents have an earned doctorate, 1[illegible] have masters, and 6% bachelor's degree.

B. Experience

Unlike industry, colleges and universities do not generally promote from within. Beinbaum (1971, p. 134) in a study of 1,222 campuses found that only 24 percent of the incumbent presidents had been previously employed in a faculty or administrative position on the campus prior to their selection as president. In another study of 171 institutions he discovered that 76 presidents had been selected from institutions that were in many ways similar to the institutions to which they came as presidents.

Whether chosen from within the institution or from some other place, by far the bulk of the presidents come from the field of education with a good deal of experience as teachers or administrators. Beinbaum (1971, p. 135) found that 86% had considerable teacher experience in a college or university. Dodds (1962, p. 268) believes the reason is obvious since he has a far better chance of being accepted by the faculty as an intellectual peer.

C. Personality

Ferrari (1970, p. 127) interviewed a number of incumbents and came to the conclusion that there is no over-riding personality type but that in most cases presidents appear to be men with a flair for making things happen, with a high degree of self-confidence, and with a philosophy of education that needed to be heard. Perhaps Auburn (1971, pp. 147-48), who had been a university president for twenty years, puts it most succinctly. He believes that the most important quality is resilience so that he is open to change and can "role with the punches". He must have great energy and dedication to the task, must be able to get along with governing board members, be an arbitor and be able to deal with a variety of publics. He views the post as one that any "reasonably competent, industrious and dedicated person can handle".

D. Religion

At one time religion was a major factor determining the selection of the president, but today it seems to have little importance, in the public institution. At any rate Bolman (1965, p. 29) found that it was seldom mentioned in the selection process, and concluded that either the candidate's religion was considered not relevant, or

that the selection committee's attitudes on this subject were tacit, not openly expressed.

The reason for the lack of open concern for religion is partially legal in that public institutions are prohibited by law from discriminating on the basis of ethnic and religious background.

E. Special Institutional Needs

The requirements of the college dictate the kind of person needed for the job. Because there is such a variety of colleges, the qualifications for presidencies differ greatly from institution to institution and from one period of history to another. The municipal college requires a man who is a good public relations man. The state college generally focuses on teaching and should choose a president who has a reputation as an educator. The church-related college would do well to choose a man with extensive experience in church work or within the religious organization.

VI. FINDING THE MAN

When the committee has been formed and has reached on consesus regarding the criteria by which the candidates shall be evaluated, the actual search may get under way. The first problem is getting the names of candidates.

A. Obtaining Names

Dodds (1962, p. 265), former president of Princeton university arns against amassing too many names. He believes that trustees may become desperate from the fatigue and frustration of having to examine too many candidates and settle upon a man more or less indiscriminately and spend years regretting it. The energy required to build even a

short list is enormous, and no energy should be wasted in going after second-raters.

Dodds may be right, but it is highly unlikely that the committee will be successful in gathering the names of only first-rate candidates.

There are several traditional ways of gathering names; the most common way - a method often demanded by institutional regulations - is advertising in a variety of publications. But other methods should be used as well. The faculty, the alumni, politicians, the heads of foundations and education associations, and the short lists from other institutions may all produce a rich source from which a selection may be made.

B. The Process of Elimination

The weeding out process may not be as difficult as the first glance at the pile of applicants may indicate. The first step should be the separation of the internal applicants from the external because these represent two very distinctive kinds of applicants. The external applications may then be sorted into four groups: a) Most likely candidates, b) Likely candidates about whom there is insufficient information, c) Less likely candidates, and d) Rejected candidates. Having done this the committee is then in a position to concentrate its efforts on gathering more information about the top two groups and should use all the resources at its command to search out as much information and from as wide a source as possible. Not only should the given references be pursued, but others who know the candidate should be contacted as well. The telephone is probably the most useful tool for this search since people are reluctant to write down what they freely share in a telephone conversation. In this way it should not take long to eliminate all but five or six of the top contenders.

C. Interviewing the Top Contenders

Committees can obtain a great deal of information about their prospects without seeing them, but eventually there must be a personal confrontation. Perhaps the best place for this first contact is on the candidate's home ground by a few members of the committee. Not only may the candidate be observed in surroundings familiar to him, but a great deal may be concluded about his work habits and his rapport with his associates.

In the final stages of the selection process virtually every institution brings the candidate on campus and exposes him to a variety of persons as well as to the entire committee. During the visit the candidate is given a tour of the facilties and general information about the institution. This is generally followed by an interview.

Interview practises vary. Some are very informal while others follow a uniform procedure. There is no evidence to indicate that one method is superior to the other. However, one matter should be made clear at all interviews: that other candidates are being interviewed as well and that no decision has yet been made. It is simple courtesy to inform all candidates in writing when a decision has been made before it is announced publicly.

D. Making the Right Choice

In some cases a certain candidate clearly leads all others and the final decision is fairly easy. If there is a division several forces may push the board into a decision. Faculty sentiment, political considerations or board pressure are but a few. But the board must decide. For better or worse, their decision will stand.

CONCLUSION

There are no rules or planned procedures for going about selecting a president. Furthermore, when one takes into account the lack of experience on the board for the task it is not surprising that some bad selections are made. A bad selection has ramifications not only for the board, the faculty and the community but particularly for the students and for the credibility of education generally.

This paper has traced the changing character of education generally and the changing role of the president particularly. The period of change is not over, the role of the president is not diminishing in importance. It is important that the way the president is selected be made a less hazardous and traumatic ordeal.

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